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Spatialising Ritual: Acts of Remembrance in Contemporary Memorial Design

Dr. Russell Rodrigo

University of New South Wales

This paper examines the processes of ritual performance and ritualisation in contemporary memorial design, and argues that through their design, creation, and use, memorials have the capacity to invoke ritual action that is akin to those associated with sacred space. Spatialising ritual is thereby achieved by consciously allowing for the possibility of ritual action, where memory, rather than an end product, is reframed as remembrance, a process.

Introduction: Ritual as Acts of Transfer

The concept of memory as a social construct rather than a neuro-psychological construct in scholarship is a recent phenomenon, emerging most notably in the work of Maurice Halbwachs in the early twentieth century. In *On Collective Memory*, Halbwachs argues that individual memory cannot exist outside the context of social memory. Individuals are able to sustain memories because they are able to recollect them within the mental frameworks constructed by the group. Halbwachs notes that these mental spaces also relate to physical spaces that particular groups occupy. In his work, however, Halbwachs does not fully address the question of how collective memories are passed on within a social group from one generation to another.

In *How Societies Remember*, Paul Connerton attempts to address this question, arguing that bodily ritual performances are the key to understanding how memories of the past are passed on:

...to study the social formation of memory is to study those acts of transfer that make remembering in common possible.....It is to this end that I have singled out, as acts of transfer of crucial importance, commemorative ceremonies and bodily practices.....But I have seized upon commemorative ceremonies and bodily practices in particular because it is the study of these, I want to argue, that leads us to see that images of the past and recollected knowledge of the past are conveyed and sustained by (more or less ritual) performances. (39)

Connerton asserts that the body as a key aspect of the formation of social memory has largely been unaddressed, arguing that images of the past and recollected knowledge of the past are conveyed and sustained within societies through “ritual” performances. In Connerton’s account, ritual is described as “rule governed activity of a symbolic character which draws the attention of its participants to objects of thought and feeling which they hold to be of special significance” (44). Ritual activities or “rites” are described by Connerton as acts that are formal, stylised, and repetitive. These ritual activities are acts of remembrance, or social processes where memory - both individual and collective - is its product.

Connerton argues that “memory is sedimented or amassed in the body” through social practices that are either inscribing or incorporating (72). Inscribing practices are those involving a cultural means of storing information, for example, constructing memorial spaces. Incorporating practices are described as the range of bodily actions which “re-enact(s) the past in our present conduct” i.e., through rituals or acts of commemoration (72-73).

Inscribing practices ultimately divide and demarcate social space for both the living and the dead. They hold information and through the act of transcription become available to future generations. Incorporating practices, on the other hand, are largely traceless and not capable of leaving behind evidence of what is remembered, but are crucial to understanding how spaces and objects evoke memories.

Ritual as Performance

Incorporating practices, through bodily ritual performance, operate as the link between the body and memorial space. As an area of academic interest, the notion of ritual and its role in the generation of meaning first emerged in the late nineteenth century to describe certain aspects of human behaviour believed to be universal. In *Primitive Culture*, anthropologist Edward Burnett Tylor, for example, argued that rituals were the application or acting out of mythical understandings of the world. Theories of ritual describe it as either a distinct and independent set of behaviours, or as an aspect of all human behaviours.

Clifford Gertz regarded ritual as a symbolic system that acts as a model *of* the way things are and a model for *how* they should be (qtd in Bell, *Ritual* 66). In other words, ritual actions and symbols are able to project idealised images that on the one hand reflect the existing social situation and, on the other hand, are able to act as a model for redirecting the social situation. Functionalists such as Emile Durkheim, Alfred Radcliffe-Brown and Bronislaw Malinowski and early Structuralists such as Arnold van Gennep and Victor Turner focused on how ritual facilitated social life, or the social function of ritual activities. Turner, for example, argued that ritual acts were transformative. Participation in ritual acts leads to a transformation in the body, a state described as liminal (Turner). In enacting ritual, the body moves from its existing state into a different state of liminality – the movement from one mental state to another. The body therefore is an essential element in ritual acts, situating it in space and time.

These early theorists studied ritual in the context of the community and conceptualised ritual meanings as fixed across time and individuals in models that discounted the possibility of personalised ritual meanings. However, later approaches to ritual theory began to acknowledge the impact of the individual on ritual activities and ritual meaning. In the 1970s, “performance theory” emerged as a new paradigm in ritual theory, one that sought to shift the focus from the community to the individual, from an approach that was objectivist to one that was constructivist. In the performance theory account of ritual, the key outcome of ritual activity is the reproduction or reshaping of an individual’s social and cultural environment:

When returned to the context of human activity in general, so called ritual acts must be seen first in terms of what they share with all activity, then in terms of how they set themselves off from other practices. Ritualisation is fundamentally a way of doing things to trigger the perception that these practices are distinct and the associations that they engender are special...Hence ritualized acts must be understood within a semantic framework whereby the significance of an action is dependent upon its place and relationship within a context of all other ways of acting: what it echoes, what it inverts, what it alludes to, what it denies. (Bell, *Ritual Theory* 220)

Rituals, as defined through performance theory, are everyday behaviours that can be transformed into a structured event through devices such as repetition and rhythm. Susanna Rostas describes ritual as a “way of acting that is habitual,” or, acts that conform to predetermined conventions and structures (19-21). In terms of understanding ritual, performance theory focuses on the similarities ritual has with the performance of theatre, drama, and the public spectacle. The link between the two acknowledges that ritual and theatrical performance are similar through the deliberate acting out of overtly symbolic actions in public:

The qualities of performance can be analysed in terms of several overlapping features. First of all, performances communicate on multiple sensory levels, usually involving highly visual imagery, dramatic sounds, and sometimes even tactile, olfactory, gustatory stimulation...Hence the power of performance lies in great part in the effect of the heightened multisensory experience it affords: one is not being told or shown something so much as one is led to experience something. (Meyerhoff 233)

The notion of “framing” is also an important aspect of understanding ritual through performance theory. Intrinsic to any performance is the awareness that what is being communicated is different and significant. Because of this framing aspect, performance is understood to be something distinct from the everyday, creating a “complete *and* condensed....type of microcosmic portrayal of the macrocosm” (Bell, *Ritual* 160).

Ritual as described by performance theory is a medium for social change, with an emphasis on human creativity and the physicality of bodily action. As opposed to earlier theories of ritual, performance theory attempts to deal with the overwhelmingly physical aspects of ritual activity rather than approaching it from an intellectual basis – “ritual does not mould people; people fashion rituals that mould their world.” (Bell, *Ritual* 73)

Performance theorists such as Bell imply that for successful or effective ritual performance, some form of transformation needs to be achieved. Performance theory has proven useful in our understanding of ritual because of its focus on the drama of the process, the focus on the physical and

bodily expressiveness of ritual and its ability to explain contemporary and secular forms of ritual such as theatre, sports and public spectacles.

In *Ritual: Perspectives and Dimensions*, Catherine Bell argues that the notion of sacral symbolism is a key characteristic of ritual-like behaviour. Sacral symbolism assumes a differentiation between a sacred realm and the everyday world of the profane - “in doing so, these activities express generalized belief in the existence of a type of sacrality that demands a special human response.” (Bell, *Ritual* 156) Ritual-like behaviour effectively creates the sacred, i.e. a situation deserving of veneration, by differentiating itself from the world of the everyday.

In terms of objects as sacred symbols, their sacrality is a function of the way in which it is more than the sum of its parts and has the ability to refer to things beyond itself, embodying and evoking connections with greater, more abstract ideas. National symbols such as flags and monuments are generally regarded not only as simply signs representing nationhood, but also as an embodiment of national values and ideals:

Hence, what makes activities around certain symbols seem ritual-like is really two-fold: the way they differentiate some places from others by means of distinctive acts and responses and the way they evoke experiences of a greater, higher, or more universalised reality – the group, the nation, humankind, the power of God, or the balance of the cosmos. (Bell, *Ritual* 159)

In summary, ritual-like activities are those actions that recognise and help define the “specialness” of a site, making it different from other places and from everyday life in a way that is able to evoke highly symbolic meanings. The “specialness” or difference of these sites defines a sacred world within the profane world of everyday life and gives rise to the experience of the sacral. Most importantly however, the characteristics of ritual-like behaviour described by Bell acknowledge and highlight the importance of the body and the way it moves in space and time.

Ritual Performance and the Legacy of Maya Lin’s Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Contemporary Memorial Design

The typology of memorialisation in western societies has remained relatively constant since the time of the Egyptian civilisation. The earliest examples took the form of monuments commemorating war, paying homage to the power of divine forces, gods and kings. Roman monuments, for example, take the form of triumphal arches celebrating the achievements of rulers or military leaders. The essential forms and motifs of Western memorial architecture therefore borrow from the Egyptian and Roman traditions with classical forms such as obelisks, columns and arches appear as the predominant memorial types.

Until the mid-nineteenth century, designers, artists, architects and builders used these forms consistently, particularly when designing war memorials. Traditionally, memorials glorified the triumphant victory of the state, rather than any reference to ordinary soldiers. From the latter half of

the nineteenth century onwards, however, a steady shift emerged away from the celebration of state power to the more complicated memorialisation of war through the sacrifices and lost lives of individual soldiers. The First World War and its aftermath brought to the fore the need for an appropriate architectural language to express the loss of individuals and communities. Rather than focusing on the glory of victory, the memorial forms of the First World War commemorate human sacrifice and the individual cost of the war. Prior to the Second World War therefore, public memorial design operated within the figurative tradition, coupled with architectural motifs such as arches, columns and obelisks. Figurative representation allowed for clear, unambiguous meaning in the representation of the past and a means for communicating an agreed system of cultural and social values.

In the period after the Second World War, a period marked by the social, political, and moral impact of events such as the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki and the Holocaust, the certainty of historic events and their meanings began to be widely debated. Giving material form to historic events such as these became problematic. The singular, defining scope of figurative representation could no longer respond to the challenges of an era defined by discontinuities and uncertainty. Memorialisation of the Holocaust in particular required significant rethinking of traditional memorialisation responses. Abstraction, on the other hand, offered the possibility of supporting divergent meanings and interpretations of the past. Therefore, after the Second World War, a new language of memorial design began to develop, leading to the appearance of greater degrees of abstraction in commemorative art. This move towards abstraction in public memorial design was also influenced by an increasing interest in formal abstraction, particularly the reconfiguring of spatial relationships between the viewer, the site and the work in minimalist sculpture of the period.

Internationally, contemporary approaches to memorial design are situated and are directly influenced by the legacy of Maya Lin's seminal work, the Vietnam Veteran's Memorial, dedicated in 1982. The Memorial consists of two 75-metre long black granite clad walls sited below grade and connected in a v-shape at a 125-degree angle. The names of more than 58,000 American dead and missing from the war are inscribed in chronological order according to the year of death or disappearance.

The Vietnam Veterans Memorial appeared in a context when public art had become an increasingly accepted form of articulating public space. The positive critical reception of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial design recognised the direct influence of the sculptural traditions of late 1970s minimalist work and site-specific public art of the time. However, criticism of Lin's design from the non-art world began soon after the design was publicly revealed. The design was initially criticised as not being sufficiently heroic. However, this dissipated quickly after the memorial's dedication when it became clear that it evoked a profound emotional response in visitors, and had become a setting for compelling personal and public ritual performances.

The Vietnam Veterans Memorial creates a place for ritual memories. Visitors descend into the earth, into a space separate from the everyday, to re-emerge on the other side in a renewed state. Touching names, taking rubbings of names, leaving personal objects, and participating in communal gatherings are ritual behaviours that are an essential part of the design of the memorial. The memorial has become a setting for private acts of commemoration in which some visitors leave physical traces of the personal cost of war and others bear witness to these participatory acts. These physical traces, in the form of letters, dog tags, teddy bears, boots and other personal items, have now become part of the experience of the memorial for visitors.

The Vietnam Veterans Memorial challenged the idea of memory as a knowable object and changed forever the popular conception of what a public memorial should be and how it should work. The benchmark set by Maya Lin's design changed the context for future memorial design where "...critical consensus now favours minimalist and abstract design over that which is grandiose and authoritative; decentred and incommensurable space over that which is central and iconic; bodily visitor experiences that are sensory and emotional rather than visual and impassive, interpretive strategies that utilize private, subjective testimony over official historical narratives..." (Williams 3).

The success of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial lies in its ability to meet both the aesthetic expectations of architecture and contemporary public art through strategies of abstraction and conceptualisation while at the same time creating a place for the expression of highly intimate, personal memorialisation rituals to occur. Cultural memory is both inscribed and incorporated through individual and collective acts of remembrance, enabled by the design of the memorial.

The Vietnam Veterans Memorial's abstract form, lack of figurative representation, and didactic content allows the work a wide variety of referents that could be attributed to it. These referents will vary according to the memorial participant but the end result is the confirmation of the memorial participant's perspective on the war, according to the referents perceived by the memorial participant. Rather than operate passively, the Vietnam Veterans Memorial asks memorial participants to work to extract their own meaning from it. The memorial is as profoundly about the experience of the memorial participant as it is about the complex contradictions of the Vietnam War. In the absence of explanations about the conduct of the war and of death itself, visitors are allowed to develop their own understandings and meanings of this still contested period of American history.

As an aesthetic response, minimalist design strategies are key to the power of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial. As a thematic term in the visual arts, "minimalism" tends to be used primarily to describe one of the seminal movements in contemporary art, the work of a range of American artists who developed a new form of abstraction in the 1960s. Predominantly found in sculpture, minimalism is marked by single or repeated geometric forms and an overt rejection of illusionism.

In the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, experience is foregrounded through the use of typical strategies of minimalism – abstraction and reduction of form and a muteness of expression and meaning. Rather than focus attention on visual codes of representation, the minimalist aesthetics of

the Vietnam Veterans Memorial focuses attention on a range of senses – sight, sound, movement, touch. Through the formal qualities of the work, the memorial participant's direct experience of the work becomes focal, the memorial participant becoming part of the experience of the work.

Since the dedication of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in 1982, minimalist design strategies have become the predominant aesthetic for public memorial design in the West, transforming the way in which public memorials, particularly those that deal with problematic pasts, have been conceived, constructed, managed, and understood. The non-representational basis of minimalist memorial design allows it to operate in domains of contested memory and politics, an area where figurative work is unable to operate as successfully as it would be interpreted as positioned. The lack of evident authorship in minimalist design implies it belongs to all, allowing a wide audience to engage with it and take ownership. The physicality and experiential focus of minimalist design emphasises its embodied relationship with the memorial participant and hence its relationship to mortality. The silence of abstraction as seen in the aesthetics of minimalism invites the visitor to project their own experiences and understandings onto the memorial, allowing for multiple and often conflicting understandings of the past to become simultaneously meaningful. Above all, minimalist memorial design allows for the projection of the individual into the conceptual and physical space of the memorial and the potential for invoking incorporating practices through ritual bodily performance.

Ritualisation in Contemporary Memorial Design

The term “ritualisation” is now the accepted term for studies that focus on ritual in technologically advanced societies (Bell, *Ritual Theory* 90). Because practice is both situational and strategic, individuals engage in ritualisation as a practical way of dealing with particular, usually significant, life situations or circumstances. Ritual is therefore “never simply or solely a matter of routine, habit, or the dead weight of tradition.” (Bell, *Ritual Theory* 92) Ritualisation can be understood as “a particular type of embodied, spatial practice” (Chidester & Linenthal 9) involving the framing of the differentiation between the everyday and the symbolic, the sacred and the profane. Ritualisation gives rise to the sacred simply because of its differentiation from the profane:

Viewed as practice, ritualisation involves the very drawing, in and through the activity itself, of a privileged distinction between ways of acting, specifically between those acts being performed and those being contrasted, mimed, or implicated somehow. That is, intrinsic to ritualisation are strategies for differentiating itself – to various degrees and in various ways – from other ways of acting within any particular culture. (Bell, *Ritual Theory* 90)

As the production of ritualised acts, ritualisation is therefore a way of acting that sets itself apart from the world of everyday actions by virtue of the nature of the actions themselves. As Bell describes, ritualisation is “...the strategic production of expedient schemes that structure an environment in such a way that the environment appears to be the source of the schemes and their values” (Bell, *Ritual Theory* 140).

Bell argues that there are several common features of ritualisation, including differentiation through space and time, the centrality of the body and the creation of an environment where the body is defined by that environment and in turn is defined by it (Bell, *Ritual Theory* 219-220). Ritualisation tends to focus on and promote the authority of forces that originate from beyond the immediate situation:

Ritualisation is fundamentally a way of doing things to trigger the perception that these practices are distinct and the associations that they engender are special...Hence ritualized acts must be understood within a semantic framework whereby the significance of an action is dependent upon its place and relationship within a context of all other ways of acting: what it echoes, what it inverts, what it alludes to, what it denies. (Bell, *Ritual Theory* 220)

In the case of memorial sites, if designed effectively with ritual action in mind, these spaces will produce a situation where the activities conducted within it are understood as natural and appropriate responses to that environment. Overt examples of ritualistic behaviour in contemporary memorial spaces include touching inscriptions, taking rubbings of inscriptions, laying floral tributes, and the leaving and/or taking of personal mementoes. More subtle examples of ritualistic behaviour can be seen in the ways in which the body may alter its speed and trajectory of movement, and the adoption of subordinate postures and behaviours within memorial space. The end product of ritualisation is the “ritualised body,” a body invested with the processes and sense of ritual:

...the moulding of the body within a highly structured environment does not simply express inner states. Rather, it primarily acts to restructure bodies in the very doing of the acts themselves. Hence, required kneeling does not merely *communicate* subordination to the kneeler. For all intents and purposes, kneeling produces a subordinated kneeler in and through the act itself. (Bell, *Ritual Theory* 100)

Conclusion: Ritualisation and Memorial Space as Sacred Space

Through ritualisation, the human body plays a crucial role in the production of sacred space. Ritual-like behaviour manipulates basic spatial dimensions, for example, the dimensions relating to up and down, near and far, right and left, inside and outside. All these dimensions centre on the axis of the living body. Spatial practices, bodily performance, and the direction of movement, contribute significantly towards the distinctive quality and nature of sacred space – “In all its gestures and motions, its rhythms and workings, the body is necessarily an integral part of the ritual production of sacred space” (Chidester & Linenthal 10).

Through the design of the commemorative artefact and the space containing it, memorials have the potential to inspire actions that are more usually associated with religious spaces. These spaces are generally designed as apart from everyday environments and engender a setting for the

performance of controlled, symbolic patterns of action. Ritual acts such as worship, formal ceremonies, and pilgrimage consecrate these spaces as sacred space. At the same time, through the distinction created by the demarcation of sacred space, the site itself provides ritual acts with their essential character as highly charged symbolic performances.

In the creation of sacred space, memorials separate those spaces entered as individuals from those entered as members of a collective. In their setting as part of the public domain, these spaces provoke the visitor to see themselves in relation to others. Public memorial spaces situate the individual in a physical and conceptual space that binds them to others and defines their belonging to a collective.

The form that memorial spaces take marks them as different to the objects and buildings of our everyday experience. They are usually set apart from the ebb and flow of everyday experience to allow for the enactment of ceremonies and rituals of both a private and public nature. Janet Jacobs notes the ways in which the sacred assumes a key role in memorialising violence and mass trauma (311-315). The discovery of metal beams in the shape of a cross in the immediate aftermath of the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Centre site, for example, "... contributed to the almost immediate sanctification of the site, a turning toward the sacred that was evident not only in the worship at the cross but in the creation of the many other popular shrines and ritual spaces that spontaneously appeared in and around the wreckage" (Jacobs 311). Similarly, Holocaust sites throughout Europe have become marked by the placement of sacred objects such as rosaries, religious candles and medals. Beyond the recognition of these sites as graveyards or burial grounds, Jacobs argues that:

....the sacralisation of these sites also serves to connect survivors to the victims, creating a shared terrain of suffering, grief, and mourning. Thus, particularly in Western culture where theories of secularization tend to prevail, it is significant to note how collective trauma and social devastation have led to a return to the sacred – especially in those places where the actual violence occurred. (Jacobs 311-315)

Through their creation, and in some cases through their design, memorials therefore have the capacity to inspire actions that are akin to those associated with sacred spaces. The sacredness of a memorial is fostered by the ritual activities that are performed there.

Spatialising ritual, in terms of the design of memorial spaces, is therefore achieved by consciously allowing for the possibility of ritual action. The focus of memorial design therefore becomes one based on human action within space rather than the making of symbolic and material. Consciously allowing for the possibility of ritual action in memorial space enables the spatialisation of bodily performance and of memory. Memory is thus seen as a practice mediated by embodied acts through material forms. Memory, rather than an end product, is reframed as remembrance, a process.

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Author Biography

Dr. Russell Rodrigo is an architect and academic with an interest in the architecture and philosophy of memory and place. His research is focused on the spatialisation of memory in the built environment, specifically the relationship between cultural memory, trauma and public space and its relationship with interiority at the scale of the both the public and the private.